



Fig. 1. Front cover of *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 9 March 1937.

‘The Modern Countrywoman’: Farm Women, Domesticity and Social Change in Interwar Britain

by *Nicola Verdon*

The common assumption that the countrywoman cares only about domesticity is not true. Moreover, it is most unfair. There are hundreds of countrywomen today who are working partners. Their husbands know and appreciate this – their wives have studied the techniques of farming and the success or failure of their efforts is jointly shared.¹

So began a letter penned by ‘R. E. W.’ from Oadby, Leicestershire, in response to the question ‘What are the real interests of countrywomen today?’, posed in the home pages of the popular farming publication *Farmers Weekly* in 1938. Her response was not exceptional. Others emphasized the varied and fulfilling lifestyles enjoyed by women, encompassing the arts, literature, handicrafts, gardening, food production, village organizations and politics, and, for those married to farmers, practical involvement in the farm business. Mrs Stone from Gloucestershire claimed that there had never been a ‘better time than the present for countrywomen’. Women, she argued, had ‘been quick to grasp changing conditions and to appreciate all new inventions’ and welcomed ‘change and recreation as much as our town cousins’, although she conceded that ‘domesticity will never really lose its charm, and her home will remain the centre from which she will view the world’.² These letters are interesting for a number of reasons. They suggest the prevailing interwar ideology of domesticity was not all-encompassing, with women contributing economically to farm households and benefiting widely from social and cultural change in the countryside. They point to the infiltration of elements of the modern and urban into what is often presumed to be a traditional, backward-looking rural society, and they reveal the parallels and distinctions drawn between town and country life. Finally they are representative of a rich and varied source – the printed farming press – which has yet to be fully exploited by historians.³ They thus supply a neglected rural perspective to historians’ debates on domesticity, gender and social change in interwar Britain.

The interwar years in Britain have traditionally been seen as ones characterized by a backlash against women's wartime emancipation, the dominant rhetoric of domesticity and motherhood asserting itself in government legislation and popularized in the burgeoning market for women's magazines.⁴ New monthly periodicals aimed at a middle-class audience such as *Good Housekeeping* (1922) and *Woman and Home* (1926) were joined the following decade by mass-circulation weeklies, most notably *Woman's Own* (1932) and *Woman* (1937). Local and national newspapers also began to cater for their female readership through the provision of 'women's pages', their style, content and contributors often overlapping with the women's magazines.⁵ The media has been portrayed as a powerful forum for the dissemination of conservative and conventional ideologies about womanhood, domesticity and family life. Cynthia White argued for example that women's magazines 'were limited in recommending a purely domestic role for women'.⁶ More recently however, this image of the media, and the interwar period as a whole, has come under considerable scrutiny. Studies by social and cultural historians have revealed the changing expectations and aspirations of the period, with increasing access to work, leisure and birth control transforming women's lives.⁷ Adrian Bingham's examination of the interwar popular press has stressed that this was a contested arena where a range of opinions and images competed. He therefore urges historians to 'develop a more sophisticated model of the relationship between the media and gender identities which recognizes the diversity and complexity of cultural representations and acknowledges that the media cannot "impose" patriarchy on an unwilling audience'.⁸

The focus of the women's magazines and women's pages was overwhelmingly metropolitan, unsurprising given that interwar Britain was an urban, industrial country. Rural women had also caught the attention of editors by this period however, and conscious that the mainstream publications did not cater for what were seen as the specific interests and needs of countrywomen, both the leading national weekly farming publications – *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and *Farmers Weekly* – as well as a number of other special-interest farming publications, included a 'home' section. These were largely aimed at working farmers' wives and families.⁹ *Farmer and Stockbreeder* first began publication under that name in 1889 and the 'Farmer's Home' page was an early feature. Its pre First World War coverage was limited to less than a page and its format concentrated on simple food recipes and dress patterns. It was during the interwar period that the home page evolved and gained a more visible identity. By that time *Farmer and Stockbreeder* had established itself as the dominant weekly farming publication, selling over 100,000 copies by 1919.¹⁰ It held this position throughout the 1920s and 30s, when at least a third of the farming population of Britain would have read, or had access to, the publication, its low price of two pence enabling distribution right across the farming ladder.

In July 1925, after the amalgamation of the *Agricultural Gazette* with *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, the home pages were retitled 'The Home' and a new editorial column by 'Countrywoman' was introduced. 'Countrywoman' was the pseudonym of Caroline Marriage, who had been writing a column for the 'Indoors' page of the *Agricultural Gazette* since 1918, describing the job as 'chattering to you weekly on whatsoever subject comes uppermost in my head'.¹¹ In October 1927 'The Home' section metamorphosed into 'About the House', its coverage extended to several pages and a panel of named experts on cookery, gardening, healthcare, childrearing and wildlife introduced. The aim of this gradual expansion was explained by 'Countrywoman' in an editorial of 1926. Although she classified the publication as 'essentially a business journal', she was keen to expose 'the important part the womenfolk play in farming' and wanted to devote the pages to 'topics likely to appeal to farmers' wives and daughters'.¹² These re-designed home pages were aimed specifically at a female readership in the 1920s. However in the mid 1930s the pages were relaunched as a glossier multi-page supplement to *Farmer and Stockbreeder* entitled 'The Farmer's Home'. Although it kept its various experts, and 'Countrywoman' presided over the pages until 1944, the supplement was designed for a more general readership, with space for handicrafts, radio listings, children's interests, topical farming news, puzzles and short stories. It was expected that farmers' wives would remain the main audience but that husbands would be enticed into 'subsequent perusal'. In her first editorial for the new 'Farmer's Home' supplement in September 1935 'Countrywoman' announced that she did not expect men 'to become wildly enthusiastic about details of cooking, knitting, fashions and matters of more essentially feminine interest', but she was keen that the supplement should represent 'the principle for which I have long fought, that the interests of men and women, though varied, are never separated by hard-and-fast divisions'. She went on, 'The more these interests are shared with understanding, the better chance of true comradeship within the family, of happiness and peace within the home'.¹³

The other major national farming paper in Britain was *Farmers Weekly*. This began publication in June 1934 and presented the voice of the confident, large-scale, forward-thinking tenant farming class. Its content covered a range of countryside issues intended to appeal to a wide audience, and its first issues included the section 'The Countrywoman at Home'. The first editorial claimed the pages were 'a little different' from the usual 'home circle' because they would provide farm women across the nation some much needed 'contact with the outside world' bringing 'unknown fields to your homes'. Women were encouraged to take part in this process.

... for your own corner of England has its particular characteristics too: when you can find five minutes to write to us about them you will be making another link between the counties, and adding to your own

pocket-money. Our real purpose is to be the link between your work and leisure and the rest of the world.¹⁴

The original home page was quickly rebranded however, and in October 1934 became known as 'The Home Section'. It was edited by Mary Day, the pen name of Mary Grigs, who had grown up and worked in London as a young woman. Her appointment was therefore considered 'an odd job for a girl who knew little about the country and less about farming', but she went on to marry a farmer and demonstrated a real empathy with farm women and country life, admonishing those who looked to the countryside 'for the picturesque or the quaint' and whose view was 'distorted by a kind of sentimental nostalgia'.¹⁵ Mary Day's editorial style was informal and sympathetic and encouraged significant reader interaction, the home pages successfully creating a community forum and shaping a sense of collective belonging for farm women in Britain in the late 1930s.

The home pages of the farming press present an unparalleled source for those researching British farmers and their families. Farmers as a social and economic class have always represented a divergent and movable group in British society, ranging from the enormously wealthy managerial farmer down to the smallholder scratching a living on a few acres.¹⁶ They have left only fragmentary evidence with which to probe their social, economic and cultural worlds. The farming press does need to be approached with caution however. John J. Fry uncovered the complex relationship between publishers, editors, reformers and readers of Midwestern farm newspapers in the USA. As a result, he argues, historians must not take material printed in agricultural papers 'as is' but try to unravel the various agendas and responses at play.¹⁷ This is relevant to the British countryside, which is now seen as a site of considerable contest, contrast and contradiction in the interwar years. The once-dominant impression of an era of decline, characterized by agricultural depression and the collapse of traditional rural social and economic structures, has been replaced in the recent historiography with a more complex model of continuity and change, with regional economic, social and physical diversity remaining paramount, and traditional rural ways of life wrestling with the increasing infiltration of modern and often urban forms of progress, lifestyles and outlooks. Alun Howkins has argued that the countryside was 'Janus faced' in the first half of the twentieth century, 'with many elements of traditional and even backward agricultural practice and social structure, coexisting with others which were profoundly modern and efficient'.¹⁸ This complexity also underpinned David Matless's study of landscape and ruralism in the twentieth century where he found 'a powerful historical connection between landscape, Englishness and the modern'.¹⁹

An analysis of the home pages of the British farming press needs to be located both within the debate on the changing nature of rural society in the interwar period, and the body of literature on the construction of feminine

norms and gender roles in women's magazines and newspapers. This article will argue that although the farm home pages largely mimicked the structure and content of women's magazines, reproducing a staple diet of recipes, household tips, dress patterns, fashion and beauty guidance, childcare and family health advice, they did so in a way that acknowledged the distinct environment of the farming world and the social and economic issues that shaped the lives of women who lived there. This meant the home pages sometimes became a site of contestation, over the rural and urban, the traditional and the modern, with different images of women's domestic, economic and social roles represented. Ultimately however the home pages promoted accommodation between these competing images, and provided a positive vision of women's lives in an attempt to make the countryside, and farm life, an attractive and pleasurable proposition for women and their families.

FARMHOUSE DOMESTICITY

The farm press recognized husbands and wives as partners in the family enterprise but their roles and responsibilities, whilst complementary, were clearly differentiated. Women were primarily charged with management of the home and care of the family. Following the configuration of the mass-circulation weekly magazines, the farm home pages were dominated by an annual cycle of articles related to cooking, bottling and preserving food, cleaning, home decoration and furnishing. These were depicted as skilled and worthwhile, an essential element in the maintenance and well-being of the farm business. 'Housework and cooking, well and properly done', *Modern Farming* declared in 1921, 'are the bedrock facts of health and happiness, the foundations whereon every successful man's work stands and every woman's happiness rests.'²⁰ Much of the advice and guidance was standard and practical and largely assumed that the farmer's wife herself performed the tasks exclusively for the benefit of the immediate family. Farm service, where young unmarried farm workers were hired on an annual contract and lived in the farmhouse, persisted in areas of northern England, Wales and Scotland in the interwar period, but was largely ignored in the home pages as it challenged the prevailing model of the privatized nuclear family.²¹ Domestic help was sometimes acknowledged as essential for the busy farmer's wife, although the supply and quality of servants was unpredictable by the 1920s, with country girls increasingly rejecting rural domestic service in favour of shop and office-based work in local towns.²² As a letter from a Norfolk farmer's wife rather bitterly noted in 1934, 'Farmhouse work is regarded as rough; a girl only goes on a farm to learn to scrub and light fires – then she tries a nice town place, to acquire the niceties of answering doors and waiting at table'.²³

An important premise attached to women's domestic management in the farm home pages was that her expertise and proficiency could promote careful household economy and thrift. As agricultural depression tightened

its grip in the late 1920s and early 1930s the household and budgeting skills of women became paramount. Readers were persuaded to make use of everything at their disposal and recipes for dishes from leftovers featured heavily, as did reminders of nutritious foodstuffs to be garnered free of charge from field and hedgerow. Readers of *Farmer and Stockbreeder* were immersed in a make-do-and-mend mentality that included sewing, knitting and darning clothes, distempering walls, repairing broken chair webbing, retiling the hearth, repapering walls and stencilling. A feature on the latter in 1926 conceded that 'the results are not of a professional perfection and are better viewed from a few feet away', but they rendered the room 'clean and fresh' with the renovation having cost 'next to nothing'.²⁴ The home pages understood the restrictions that rural living and crumbling farmhouse structures imposed on women's daily housework routines and renovation options, with supplies of water, heating and lighting still very patchy in the 1930s. As *Farmers Weekly* put it, 'The problems that face the countrywoman in the easy running of her home are, of course, very different from those experienced in large towns'.²⁵ But farm women were warned that this was no barrier to modernization. 'There is no need for any house to be old-fashioned to-day', readers of *Farmer and Stockbreeder* were told in 1933, 'and this applies to the farmhouse as much as to town dwellings'.²⁶

Although women were praised for their proficiency in domestic economy, some experts saw a need to re-educate farm women in traditional skills, knowledge and methods which they felt were being lost. The home pages were keen to uphold and conserve traditional methods and approaches associated with the rural domestic economy. Features on regional cookery were prominent, as were articles on pig killing and 'putting away'. *Farmer and Stockbreeder* lamented that the 'modern process' of sending the family pig to the local slaughterhouse often resulted in 'the farmer's wife buying her bacon from the family stores in very much the same way as does her town sister', whilst the old farmhouse art of translating the pig carcase into tasty treats was 'now sadly neglected... portions are thrown away, when they might be converted at little cost into delicacies for the farm table'.²⁷ The promotion of household crafts such as rug-making, quilting and embroidery was also double-edged. These were depicted as an important part of both women's domestic economy and leisure experience, through which she could find expression of skill and pleasure. *Farmer and Stockbreeder* categorized rug-making as 'an interesting occupation' that afforded 'plenty of scope for those with an artistic sense to carry out their own ideas and designs', whilst embroidery could provide a restful evening activity in the long dark winter nights, 'at ease in one's favourite chair'.²⁸ But encouraging women to participate in such crafts also served to assist the preservation of fast-disappearing rural traditions. As a *Farmers Weekly* article on quilting in 1935 argued, 'We have so few crafts left we can ill afford to let this work slip away from its original simplicity and utility'.²⁹ The kitchen of the

farmhouse was compared to the farm, the yard and even the village blacksmith in being a 'school of craft', transmitting inherited skills down through the generations. The home pages feared that this 'ancient wisdom' was being undermined by the homogeneity of modern life. The perpetrators of this threat came from both inside and outside the rural world, as mass production, education programmes and farming practices all increasingly brought standardization. The regional distinctiveness of the countryside was therefore in danger.³⁰ The application of craftsmanship and heritage to home management and domestic arts attached an additional responsibility to the duties of the farm housewife. It also exposed a tension between modernity and traditional ways of rural life and a strain of conservative ruralism that was a significant part of the farming press in the interwar years.

The endorsement of rural custom and regional character did not however prevent the home pages promoting a vision of modernity which, like women's magazines and newspapers, showcased scientific domestic management and technology to professionalize housework. Modern household appliances were represented as potentially labour-saving, enabling women to reallocate their time away from material aspects of family welfare (washing, cleaning and heating) to social and cultural family pursuits. *Farmers Weekly* argued right from its inception that electricity could revolutionize rural women's lives, releasing them from the 'slavery of domestic work'.³¹ In advertisements from the mid 1930s women were introduced to the 'magic' transformation that electricity could bring to the farmhouse. Warmth, light, cleanliness and comfort were all promised, banishing the need to make fires, carry coal, pump water or fill lamps. This, a 1935 advertisement claimed, brought time for 'Leisure for hobbies... for a fuller social life, health and comfort for the whole family'. Household appliances were shown as introducing the modern comforts enjoyed by town women into the farmhouse. A 1935 advertisement for the Electrolux refrigerator began 'Country homes may be out of town; but in the kitchen they can be as up-to-date as a modern Mayfair flat'. Kitchen equipment was also presented as complementary to modern farm technology managed by men. The Aga cooker, for example, could do 'for the farmhouse kitchen what machinery does for the farm' by saving labour and cutting costs.³² Each year both publications sent correspondents to the Ideal Home Exhibition held at Olympia, the apex, as Judy Giles has argued, of the lower middle-class cult of home-making.³³ In these reports farmers' wives were deemed to be just like any other proud British housewife. 'The days of drab kitchens and dingy furnishings are definitely past', *Farmers Weekly* reported from the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1935, 'and housewives everywhere are on the look out for fresh ideas in connection with furnishing and equipping their homes on modern labour saving lines'.³⁴


In common with other women's magazines and home pages, the farming weeklies were purveyors of 'new consumerism' by the 1930s.³⁵ *Farmer and Stockbreeder* began a column in the late 1920s entitled 'Round the shops', in recognition that 'many of our readers live far from the big shopping centres

and have few opportunities of seeing dress displays'.³⁶ At first the notion of fashion was treated as largely unpractical and marginal to the busy and cash-strapped life of a farmer's wife, who had 'little use for the numerous and varied garments of the townswoman, lovely though they may be'.³⁷ By the mid 1930s however, after the depression had lifted, the paper introduced a regular correspondent, 'London woman', who sent a weekly dispatch from the capital 'to her country relatives' as the strap line ran. The rhetoric began to change. Farm women were now repositioned on a par with their urban sisters, conversant with modern tastes and trends. They were increasingly reproved for not paying attention to their style and appearance. Skin aging for example, once considered 'a natural consequence of country life', was shown to be controlled with a little care and attention.³⁸ The representation of the 'modern countrywoman' was frequently conveyed and is encompassed in this 1937 article:

There was a time when the 'country cousin' on her rare visits to the Metropolis, was considered a subject for slightly scornful amusement by her London sister. That legendary figure has long ceased to exist, and her place has been taken by the modern countrywoman, who pays frequent shopping visits to town and who purchases with discrimination the lovely tweeds and jaunty hats which fill to perfection a dual role.³⁹

Did this material influence the lifestyles and budgetary decisions of farm women in the 1930s? Did it reflect their everyday experiences? We clearly need to tread with caution here. As we saw in the introduction, women themselves often connected their identities to roles beyond the domestic sphere. There was also occasional editorial exasperation at the countrywoman's continuing reluctance to embrace expert advice, noting for example, a 'lingering tendency' to neglect beauty treatment 'as she still considered it "out of place in the country"'.⁴⁰ Importantly, historians have noted that the gap between the aspirational domesticity of the Ideal Home Exhibition or refrigerator advertisements and the reality of ordinary women's lives was often very wide.⁴¹ The penetration level of domestic electrical appliances in interwar Britain was very slow, with only 2.4 per cent of wired homes owning a refrigerator and 38.6 per cent a vacuum cleaner in the late 1930s.⁴² By that time a quarter of English parishes still had no piped water supply and only about 1 in 10 farms were wired up to mains electricity.⁴³ Practical considerations and operational costs therefore prohibited many farm wives, particularly those on small cash-strapped farms, from owning modern domestic labour-saving devices. Where funds were available, they were more likely to be spent on farm equipment or family entertainment (especially radios) than housekeeping appliances. A feature article on the farming districts of Scotland for *Farmers Weekly* in 1936 argued that whilst a farmer would 'spend as much money as the bank will lend him, in

Electricity . . .
a boon to the
farmer's wife



Think of the boon of abundant hot water at the turn of a tap. Think of a kitchen sparkling with cleanliness—an oven full of delicious cookery. Warmth, light, comfort. All without fires to rake, coal to carry, water to pump, lamps to trim and fill and clean!

This is the magic change that electricity is bringing to the farmhouse all over the country to-day.

Leisure for hobbies, pleasant and profitable; leisure for a fuller social life, health and comfort for the whole family; that is what electricity brings.

With the coming of the electric mains, the country dweller enjoys the pleasures of the country and the amenities of the town.

switch to
ELECTRICITY

Write for free literature of much interest to you, to the Director, British Electrical Development Association Inc., 2, Savoy Hill, London, W.C.2.

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Fig. 2. Advertisement for electricity, *Farmers Weekly*, 28 December 1934.

order to save labour on the land, by the use of expensive machinery', few would do the same 'to save unnecessary work in the house'. This burdened women with incessant labour 'in an inconvenient house that looks prehistoric beside the beautifully planned houses in the towns'. The world of high fashion, furnishings and modern domestic conveniences had little application to daily life on all but the wealthiest and most advanced farms where women had become 'less like farmers' wives and more like the wives of any other business men'.⁴⁴

This divergence should not obscure the important role the home pages played in representing rural domesticity as a worthwhile, up-to-date and inclusive experience. As in other newspapers, negative aspects of domestic life, such as the breakdown of relationships and the pressures wrought by financial collapse, were not covered by these home pages.⁴⁵ Their agenda was knowingly sanguine, promoting farmhouse domesticity as grounded in traditional rural practices but responsive to modern urban living. It was shown to be an engaging and valuable role for married farm women, the bedrock of a satisfying and prosperous farming world.

EDUCATIVE MOTHERHOOD

Women had a pivotal role to perform in serving the farming interest as good housewives and domestic managers, but, according to the home pages, the duties of motherhood were no less important. Women were reproducing and socializing the next generation of farmers and farmers' wives, contributing to their social and practical wellbeing and, crucially, providing future stability and security for the farm family and ultimately, therefore, for British farming as whole. *Farmer and Stockbreeder* noted in 1926, 'It is the strictly disciplined life of the well-managed farmhouse that makes the future wife of the farmer so competent. Agriculture will, as in the past, meet with periods of depression, but will still be assertive while we have the farmer's wife (and daughter)'.⁴⁶ Like domesticity, motherhood was imbued with modern scientific rationalism, with experts proffering advice on everything from potty training and childhood illnesses to disciplining bad behaviour and encouraging straight backs and good table manners. Most importantly, though, as mothers of the next generation of rural inhabitants, women were charged with ensuring their children received an education that would fit them, both practically and psychologically, for life on the farm. Lack of educational and employment opportunities for the sons and daughters of farmers was seen as the basis for continued out-migration in the 1920s and '30s. Although the rural population was actually beginning to increase in the interwar period, reversing the trend of many decades, this growth was the result of the in-migration of urban men and women in search of their own piece of the rural idyll.⁴⁷ For farm-bred boys and girls, the attractions of town life still outweighed those of the countryside and this disinclination to stay on the

land generated a real fear of the degeneration of 'true' rural stock. *Farmer and Stockbreeder* reported in 1926,

There can be no homes throughout the country in which it is felt more keenly than in farmhouses that the education given of late years to our children and young people in village schools is not calculated to fit them for a rural life, or cause them to live happily and usefully amid their native surroundings. Whether boys or girls the young people strain at the leash. A town life is what they long for, and they worry themselves and their elders until they get it; with the result that the towns are overcrowded, and it becomes harder and harder for the workers there to obtain employment; while on the farms a hundred and one things cry out to be attended to, and there are too few hands to do them.⁴⁸

To prevent migration mothers were pressed to use their influence to affect change in the rural school curriculum. The exposure of sub-standard administration and teaching in rural schools led to much post-war discussion of the most appropriate education and training provision for rural children.⁴⁹ This concern was reflected in a 1928 government enquiry into 'The Practical Education of Women for Rural Life', which concluded, amongst other things, that 'The country woman's place in national life is significant since her influence is one of the biggest factors in stemming or furthering migration to towns'.⁵⁰

Farm women were therefore identified as among the chief social agents in rural society, with an influential role to play in teaching their children the value of rural life and work. The home pages assisted them in this by heavily featuring career opportunities for the daughters of farmers, where they promoted positive, attractive and accessible images of young rural working women. Here there was some recognition that attitudes towards girls' careers among farming people lagged somewhat behind 'townsfolk'. A feature article in *Farmers Weekly* in 1936 pointed out that farmers' daughters should not rely on a good marriage for their future happiness but needed 'a career every bit as much as any urban middle-class daughter':

Townsfolk have wakened up to the practical advantages of letting their girls earn money; perhaps they understand also that independence gives a girl a feeling of personal dignity and self-reliance which is not without its value if she marries, and which is even more valuable if she remains single... But country-folk are notoriously slower to adopt to new ideas. The emancipation of women is still pretty 'new' to the farming class. Too many daughters are kept at home to help mother as a matter of course, regardless of the particular abilities of the girls themselves.⁵¹

Along with national organizations such as the Women's Farm and Garden Association, the home pages were important conduits for promoting the

professionalization of agricultural work for young women along scientific and modern lines through training and practical experience.⁵² The reports were dominated by the dairy, poultry and horticultural industries but careers such as nursing, childcare and catering were also featured as their demands were considered to be instinctively met by girls brought up on farms.⁵³

There were several motives at play here. The first was to instil a sense of pride in rural work and encourage farmers' daughters, through their mothers' counsel, to remain in the countryside. The work was depicted as clean, light, engaging and potentially lucrative for young single women. In dairying for example, *Farmer and Stockbreeder* assured its readers that it was 'quite possible' for those who wanted to enter the industry 'to secure good posts at substantial salaries if they have received a sound, practical and scientific training'.⁵⁴ But the reports did not effectively challenge dominant feminine norms and expectations of the period. Girls entering farming careers could be introduced to suitable prospective marriage partners and their work prepared them for a future married life as a farmers' wife. Moreover, the careers featured most heavily were limited to a small number of 'appropriate' and 'feminine' jobs traditionally connected to the woman's province of farming. This reflected the approach of girls' magazines in general. As Penny Tinkler has argued, although in the interwar period there was anxiety that the modern career girl would undermine the ascendancy of marriage and patriarchal relations, the privileging of feminized jobs preserved dominant cultural constructs of womanhood, matrimony and family life.⁵⁵

WORKING PARTNERS

Whilst the home pages of the farming press were keen to endorse suitable careers for the daughters of farmers, they did not countenance paid employment for married women. This was in line with national disquiet over married women's work in general, particularly during the worst years of the depression when the rhetoric of many trade-union organizations, government agencies and employment commentators stressed the rights of men to a job with a living wage.⁵⁶ The focus on domesticity and motherhood in the farming press meant that the contribution many farmers' wives still made to agricultural production was downplayed. During an era of depression many small farms would have cut costs by increasing the use of family labour at the expense of hired labour, and the often essential contribution made by the wives and families of small farmers was recognized by a range of commentators in the late 1920s. In 1927 Samuel Bensusan noted that the small farmer of North Yorkshire was 'rich in the assistance he receives from his family towards the efforts he makes in every direction to wrest a living from a small and reluctant acreage'.⁵⁷ The 1928 'Practical Education' report understood that whilst the farm wife usually undertook 'definite responsibilities in certain directions', she was 'directly concerned with all the agricultural work carried out on the farm', and might 'in time of illness or

emergency, have to assume general control of the holding'.⁵⁸ Framed by an agenda of domesticity and representing the outlook of the large, modernizing farming class, the home pages largely ignored this input. This can be interpreted as another strategy by which the home pages attempted to raise the status of farm women by divorcing them from the 'dirty' work of the farm. As Mary Neth has argued in relation to the American Midwestern magazine *The Farmer's Wife*, defining farm women primarily in relation to their domestic role raised their social status but 'within the confines of middle-class definitions of womanhood and modern agriculture'.⁵⁹

But the focus of the farm home pages was not wholly limited to domestic concerns and they did appreciate that farmers' wives continued to have a productive role. 'The housewife in the farm', *Farmer and Stockbreeder* declared in 1932, 'is traditionally in control of many activities that do not begin and end with the house'. Similarly Mary Day in an early editorial of *Farmers Weekly* found it 'immensely encouraging' that 'so many country housewives – even in the difficult few years we have been through lately – have managed to make their side of the farm pay'.⁶⁰ Women's 'side of the farm' related to three key categories of activity. The first was schemes involving the breeding and rearing of small animals. The British farmer's wife had traditionally been in charge of small animals for centuries, most notably poultry and pigs, through which she contributed to the farm family income.⁶¹ The breeding of pigs continued to be a subsidiary occupation on dairy and mixed farms in the interwar years, as it wasn't until after the Second World War that demand for pork products significantly transformed this area of farm production. Thus it remained, as *Farmer and Stockbreeder* put it in 1927, 'an ideal side-line' and 'if carefully run' on a small scale, could provide women 'with a profitable and interesting hobby'.⁶² In contrast, the fortunes of poultry production were beginning to change. Capitalizing on increasing demand from towns and cities, poultry numbers doubled in the decade between 1924 and 1934 and accounted for an increasingly significant share of agricultural profits.⁶³ As it moved towards large-scale production, employing managers and assistants, poultry farming shifted away from its 'feminine' image on the sidelines of farming and, although there was still room for the small female producer, farm wives increasingly found it difficult to make a profit from poultry in the 1930s. One reader reported in 1938 'I can't sell eggs at a good enough price to make any profit at all – I think I am lucky if I get enough out of a quarter's egg-sales to buy one of the children a pair of shoes', whilst another complained that her poultry profits were 'almost non-existent' that year.⁶⁴

As the large producers increasingly squeezed farm women out of traditional areas like poultry, alternative strategies were sought, resulting in an impressive range of other breeding schemes. Pheasant-farming could be attempted by 'any woman who has a ground knowledge of rearing chicks' and along with the breeding of pea fowl or guinea fowl it promised 'not only an interesting hobby' but 'a profitable sideline on the farm'. Rabbit-keeping

needed 'little capital' and offered 'real possibilities' for 'the girl who wants to make an income without leaving home, or for the wife who would like to make some "pin-money"'. Goats were also 'very suitable stock for women' to control. Similarly bee-keeping was a 'suitable spare-time occupation for women' which required 'no fixed amount of time or elaborate set of buildings' and 'under the present difficult conditions' could offer a welcome source of income.⁶⁵

The cultivation, marketing and selling of home produce was the second money-making scheme open to women. This was aided by the sustained growth of a number of 'alternative' agricultures in interwar Britain, most notably the fruit, vegetable, and flower sectors. Soft fruit was considered a straightforward and potentially profitable avenue, needing little outlay and generating a profitable turnaround in a short period. One correspondent told Mary Day, 'Though I work hard in the house, doing all a housewife's ordinary job, I have managed more than once to average, from my strawberries, as much as £6 per week for the whole of July'.⁶⁶ For another, raspberries represented a real boon:

We were selling raspberries at 4d per pound last year, compared with 1 ½d a pound from the jam manufacturer, so there was a more generous profit in that. The butchers' and bakers' vans take them into town for us and bring back the pails, for a small commission, so that does away with carriage charges. The proceeds of our retail trade usually pay for the picking. On the whole, we think if every acre of the farm paid the same percentage of profit as the raspberries, farming would be really worth while.⁶⁷

Farmers' wives were encouraged to utilize the kitchen garden not only for family subsistence but also to profit from the selling of surplus vegetable crops. Although it was deemed necessary for a man to perform the initial 'rough digging', garden labour was considered not too physically demanding 'for one who is used to washing or dairy work'.⁶⁸ Women were reminded that other traditional farmhouse fare had a market in the slack winter season. The sale of pork pies meant 'a little extra money into the farm household during the winter', whilst 'the enterprising housewife' could 'make a little money out of home-made brawn' at pig-killing time.⁶⁹ The market for flowers could also be lucrative. Lavender afforded pleasure for the grower 'by reason of its colour and fragrance' but could also 'be turned to profitable account if grown in sufficient quantities'.⁷⁰ One correspondent to *Farmers Weekly* found her moderate attempts at growing tulips 'a very good way of making a little pin-money', whilst another, who had turned to chrysanthemum cultivation, was more forthcoming: 'I reckon to make from 10s a week, some weeks up to 15s, right from August to Christmas for flowers, and about £2 for my surplus cuttings'.⁷¹ Farm women were assisted in these efforts by the Women's Institute scheme for the co-operative

marketing and selling of members' produce at local markets. This was instigated by the Lewes branch in East Sussex in 1919, and enabled women to keep control over marketing, pricing and labelling their produce.

Farm women were also innovative in taking advantage of a third expanding market in the 1920s and '30s: the leisure industry. After the First World War the British countryside increasingly became a site of leisure and pleasure for thousands of urban day trippers and holidaymakers, aided by the growth of cheap rail-fares and car ownership. Although the development of rural tourism led to serious urban-rural conflict over the ownership and utilization of land, some in the countryside saw it as an opportunity to exploit a lucrative ready market.⁷² There were two main areas of potential revenue for women – taking paying guests into the farmhouse, and setting up tea-rooms and roadside catering for passing trade. A *Farmer and Stockbreeder* article in 1930 on an enterprising farmer's wife who had made 'a welcome addition to the family purse' by setting up a garden stall with cool drinks, sandwiches, fruit and homemade ice-cream, concluded that 'The scope for roadside catering... increases every year, for each summer sees a greater invasion of the countryside by motorists, cyclists and ramblers'.⁷³ Bed and breakfast was more time-consuming and labour-intensive, the peak season coinciding with the height of the farming calendar. Readers of *Farmer and Stockbreeder* in the mid 1920s were advised to 'go into this matter on business lines', and warned that it would not necessarily be 'an easy way to make money, for much forethought and work are called for if the idea is to be a success'.⁷⁴ In many areas of southern England, Wales and the northern hill country bed and breakfast became established as an essential part of the farm income by the late 1920s and it received considerable coverage in the press as a viable option for 'the woman who can undertake the hard work... has the rooms and conveniences, and lives in a district that is likely to attract visitors'. *Farmers Weekly* suggested in 1938 that a woman who gave 'her best care, consideration and cooking, and makes the guests feel happy and at home' could earn between two and three guineas a week.⁷⁵

These reports were both informative and educative, encouraging women to participate in a range of ventures. Readers were invited to communicate their own entrepreneurship and, have we have seen, did so enthusiastically. Their letters suggest that women were eager to show their role went beyond a narrowly defined domestic one, that they took pride in their work and they wanted to share their knowledge and experience with other readers. As Mrs Mabel Bowes, from Yorkshire, wrote in 1935, 'I do particularly like other readers' letters, telling of different experiences and ways of doing their work. We are never too old to learn, and certainly farming to-day needs all the knowledge we can gather to make a go of it'.⁷⁶ Technically the money women earned through these schemes was their own and the home pages understood that economic activity could earn women the right to purchase items for personal pleasure. *Farmer and Stockbreeder* even encouraged its readers to open separate bank accounts for their profits, arguing 'To the

countrywoman, a banking account is even more useful than to her cousin of the town' and urging that 'This account should be kept quite separate from her household money account'.⁷⁷ In reality however any profit was usually ploughed back into the family income. As one woman wrote to *Farmers Weekly*, 'We run the garden for market purposes and though it is mostly my work, it goes into the general funds of the farm'.⁷⁸

There was a potential tension between women's household duties and the income-generating activities which revealed women as important economic players in the farm family. Diversification schemes were often skilled and physical, required business acumen and technical knowledge, and made a valuable contribution to farm income at a time of severe economic strain. Howkins cites them as 'an essential, if hidden, part of the income of farming and labouring families'.⁷⁹ The home pages were in fact happy to acknowledge women's contributions; any anxieties over gender roles were overcome by highlighting the interconnection between women's domestic and economic activities. Rearing of small animals, food production and sale, and the provision of accommodation could be categorized by the home pages as legitimate work for married women to undertake, which did not take them away from the farmhouse (except occasionally to market) and could be performed as an addition to, not instead of, domestic labour. The language of the farm press reports classified such schemes as hobbies or interests, implying a contrast to the 'proper' work of the farm, and as they generated 'pin-money' or 'profit from sidelines' they did not undermine the breadwinning role of the male head of farm household. Although these articles underplayed the threat to the segregation of gender roles, they did go some way to subvert the dominant domestic ideology of the period. They showed women as working partners in the family business and highlighted the multifaceted roles undertaken by farmers' wives both inside and outside the farmhouse.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The farm home pages also sought to address the changing social and political role of women and promoted active citizenship for farm women in their local communities. Reports on organizations and associations relevant to rural women were frequent in both *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and *Farmers Weekly*. Most notable was the Women's Institute (WI), which played a central role in revitalizing village life in the aftermath of the First World War and politicized rural women by running national campaigns on welfare issues central to village life such as water supply and housing provision. The WI became one of the most successful mainstream women's organizations in interwar Britain, boasting 318,000 members by 1938.⁸⁰ *Farmers Weekly* had no doubts about the importance of the movement to the British countryside. In its first edition in 1934 the home page argued that the 'rise of the WIs is the most important event in rural England since the dissolution of the monasteries', bringing 'comradeship' and an awakening of 'mind and

spirit' to the lives of countrywomen.⁸¹ The WI also encouraged women to stand for parish and district councils (which they had been eligible to do since the 1890s), and although village politics remained a bastion of male power, by the 1920s it was considered an area that would benefit from the female point of view. As *Farmer and Stockbreeder* noted of a list of parish council duties in 1926, 'there is hardly one of them where a woman's wit would not be quite as useful as a man's, and in some directions it might be considerably better'.⁸² How far farm women were able to break through social and cultural barriers to sit on the committees of parish and local councils is open to speculation. Even the WI, whilst inclusive in its constitution and membership, remained largely middle and upper-class in its leadership at both local and national level. More comprehensive was the change to the British parliamentary franchise in 1928, when all women over twenty-one were granted the vote for the first time. Readers of *Farmers' Weekly* were pressed to use the ballot to hasten change. Doreen Wallace, writer and social campaigner and wife of a farmer, reminded readers that their vote was the most 'powerful weapon in their hands – if they use it to get what they want'. Evoking the language of Edwardian suffragism she encouraged readers to 'Make it quite clear to any Parliamentary candidate that he will not have your support unless he really looks after your interests, and show him definitely you expect something more than just promises – that deeds, not words are what you want – and you will get something done'.⁸³

It has been argued that organizations such as the WI, whilst radical in origin, promulgated a brand of conservative feminism, enabling women to take part in public activities beyond the home that did not fundamentally challenge traditional gender roles.⁸⁴ But their importance, acknowledged by the home pages, lay in encouraging women to embrace new interests that were relevant to them as *rural* inhabitants. The home pages, by documenting this, also helped fashion a sense of collectivity amongst their readers in the 1930s. The language again drew upon traditional rural heritage to construct a distinctive representation of the modern countrywoman. 'With the sturdy sense and independence of her grandparents and great-grandparents in her (and a pride in her inheritance), with her inborn understanding and love of the land', *Farmers Weekly* argued in 1939, 'she is able to keep a sense of proportion that it is difficult to preserve in towns.' But this birthright was fortified by the recent social changes that countrywomen had embraced. 'Through her own organisation she is taking a stronger part in the social and economic developments of the country community... She is no longer lonely and isolated. She is no longer dependent on her immediate surroundings for all her interests.'⁸⁵ The growing availability of national newspapers, travelling libraries, and radio, as well women's organizations and the home pages themselves, assisted in bringing the wider world into focus and shaped farm women into citizens of the British nation as well as

the village. The result was a countryside represented as one not only worth living in, but as war approached, worth fighting for:

It used to be said that countrymen and women were slow in the uptake; but when just over a year ago the shadow of war began considerably to deepen, country folk quickly showed themselves as ready for national service of all kinds as any town-dweller... we knew that preparing in this way, we were contributing our atom of loyalty and service to our country.⁸⁶

* * *

The *Farmers Weekly* vision of the 'modern countrywoman' of the late 1930s was confident and optimistic. It stressed that a significant element of change had enriched the lives of women since the nineteenth century. Although the home pages often stressed the continuities of rural life, with age-old farmhouse and country traditions represented as being at the centre of British national identity, they also welcomed some modernizing elements of the contemporary world and the transformations they afforded women. The representation of farm women as wives, mothers, homemakers and domestic managers was infused with visions of modernity: they were to run their homes using scientific and rational methods as did their husbands in managing the farms, they were to be informed by current urbane tastes in fashion and furnishings, and conversant with local and national affairs. The convergence of the rural world with the urban and the modern did not undermine the underlying premise of the farm home pages, however, that country women were different, were partners in a demanding business where they played numerous roles and deserved their own magazine to represent this.

How far the 'modern countrywoman' accorded with the daily realities of farm women's lives is debatable. Both *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and *Farmers Weekly* were published in London and reflected the concerns of the large, successful farmer, most likely situated in the south of England, near to metropolitan influences and communication networks. Britain remained a country of significant regional and local variations in its rural social, economic and cultural structures during the interwar period and these were often underplayed in the desire to create an inclusive representation of farm women's lives. The home pages were on a mission to convince women of their central role in the regeneration of the countryside. They had to make country life attractive to married farm women to ensure the survival of the farm family and ultimately the countryside itself. Women were shown to have the best of both worlds available to them, given licence to enjoy the temptations of town life, but able to return to an enriching and rewarding countryside, where they were valued as an integral part of farm, family and community life. At a time when the British countryside was

afforded a key space in debates about national identity, stability and efficiency, the upbeat representation of the role played by farm women was crucial.

Nicola Verdon is a senior lecturer in history at the University of Sussex. She has published widely on gender and labour in the British countryside and is currently writing a book on the history of the farmworker since 1800.

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